Egyptian Magic
/ TRAVELLING EXHIBITION
Iuty seated
Tomb statue
Limestone / Saqqara / 19th Dynasty (1307–1196 BC)

Cover:
Horus standing on antelope
Votive statuette
Bronze / Late Period (712–332 BC)
Bold and unique, this exhibition invites visitors to connect with the thinking of the ancient Egyptians, who put absolute trust in magic—an omnipresent force in the world of the pharaohs. They considered magic as both the source of supernatural wisdom and a means to influence their fate. According to myth, the gods used magic to create the world and give humans powers that would help them in their struggle to survive.

The term “magic” has symbolic connotations that evoke charm, enchantment, and wonder. By presenting the theme of magic in connection with the fascination exerted by Egypt, the exhibition appeals to the public at large, attracting both lovers of ancient Egypt and the curious.

EGYPT IS A WORLD OF WATER AND LIGHT,
OF SAND AND STONE,
OF NOISE AND DUST.
A WORLD OF ETERNITY.

Florence Maruéjol, from Une Égypte intime: Regards d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, 2007 (trans.).
Six major subject areas are presented, each supported by abundant content.

I. Mythical Magic
This section explores the ancient Egyptians' belief that magic originated with the birth of the universe. According to this creation myth, the world is the stage for a daily battle between the forces of good and evil. Humans have a role to play in this battle, thanks to the magic powers bestowed upon them by their creator, as well as the other divine gifts they have received: language, writing, and creativity. The subjects addressed include the forces of good and evil, the cosmic dimensions of magic, and the “ritual of the opening of the mouth.”

II. Occupation: Magician
Ancient Egypt was home to many kinds of magicians, and all people used incantations on a daily basis. This section considers the scribes, priests, herbal healers, and privileged few who had access to scientific writings. These fascinating figures possessed knowledge that was inaccessible to the largely illiterate population. Presented in this area are the instruments, books, and materials used in Egyptian magic.

III. Magic in Daily Life
Today, we dismiss magic as superstition, surrounded as we are by countless forms of protection against risk. But magic inspired confidence in the Egyptians, offering the promise of a positive outcome in a context that provided no other safety net against misfortune or illness. This section sheds light on the belief of ancient Egyptians that magic could be used to positively influence fate. It also looks at the special role of magicians in protecting the weakest members of society. Magic was used to ward off wild animals and illness, protect homes, mothers and children, attract love, and ensure fertility—a variety of subjects that offer insight into the place of magic in everyday life.

IV. Sacred Magic
This section immerses visitors in the fascinating life of the temple—the point of contact between heaven and earth, where priests worked to maintain the equilibrium of creation. There, they performed daily rituals, as well as rites associated with annual festivals. As the dwelling place of the divine, the temple had to be protected from the forces of evil. Visitors discover how sacred cults served to protect Egypt, its harvest, and its gods, who needed the support of humankind to battle the forces of evil.
Imhotep depicted as a reading sage
Votive statuette
Faience / Late Period (712–332 BC)

Taweret
Amulet
Faience / Late Period (712–332 BC)

Tutu / Votive stela / Limestone / Greek Period (332–31 BC)
V. Magic for the Hereafter
Magic pointed the way to the hereafter and the eternal life that followed after death. A variety of magic objects provided food for the deceased, while amulets protected the tomb and mummy from demons and intruders. On the journey to the realm of the dead and the divine court of justice of Osiris, the deceased was protected from danger by the spells contained in the Book of the Dead, which served as a travel guide to the hereafter, as well as a currency and passport. This section considers such subjects as mummification, descent in the hereafter, and rebirth.

VI. Immortal Egypt
Egyptian magic exerted a profound influence on later cultures. The Greeks and Romans traced their cultures back to that of Ancient Egypt and considered its wisdom to be supernatual in origin. Early Christianity and Islam drew inspiration from adaptations of Egyptian theories about God, humanity, and the universe. Along with the Egyptian knowledge of alchemy, these texts influenced the development of European philosophy and science over centuries.

Today, a number of occult and esoteric movements claim—rightly or not—Egypt to be the source of their knowledge. This section presents these cultures and movements.

CAPTIVATING OBJECTS
The Egyptian collection of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden ranks among the top ten in the world. A wide-ranging selection of objects illustrate the themes of the exhibition, while sparking curiosity and fascination. Statues of high priests and scribes, magical instruments, animal statuettes, papyrus scrolls, steles representing ceremonies, jewelry, and amulets are among the many objects that recall the magical world of ancient Egypt. A number of these objects were considered “magic”: belonging to individuals who performed temple rites and ceremonies, they carried great symbolic weight. Materials such as wood, slate, basalt, steatite, resin, clay, paper, and gold call attention to the quality and superb craftsmanship of the artisans of ancient Egypt. In all, some 240 objects vividly illustrate the themes of the exhibition.

Demotic conjuring book
Papyrus / Thebes / Roman Period (200–300 AD)
Drinking bowl with protective charms in Aramaic, used as a trap for demons
Ceramic / Iraq / Islamic Period (600–800 AD)
Mask
Cartonnage, gold leaf / Roman Period (0–100 AD)
ORIGINAL DESIGN
The overall artistic vision for the exhibition draws on the ancient Egyptian understanding of magic as the link between three worlds: that of humans, that of the gods, and that of the dead. This concept underlies the decision, in the original design, to forego walls that would obstruct the visitor’s view of the magical world of ancient Egypt. The contents are arranged across displays that evoke sand dunes and guide visitors through the exhibition.

An original multimedia work was created specifically for the exhibition. The passage from night to day was an important concept in the life of the ancient Egyptians. To convey this notion, a panoramic projection of Egyptian desert dunes was designed to play across a large wall space. Over a span of 70 minutes, the image passes subtly through the 24-hour cycle of a day. In the section about magic in everyday life, the mysteries of the desert are juxtaposed with video images of the luxuriant shores of the Nile—a world of both fertility and hidden danger.

Listening stations present poetic texts that further explore the theme of the struggle of good and evil, and of day and night. Visitors are initiated into a magical world that unfolds across a mysterious desert universe.

A MODULAR CONCEPT
This exhibition was organized by the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, the Netherlands, in collaboration with Musées de la civilisation de Québec.

The exhibition is designed for a surface area of 650 to 800 square meters (7000 to 8600 square feet), but the content can be adapted as required. It will be available to tour from May 2016.

The exhibition includes:
• The loan of some 240 objects from the collection of the Rijksmuseum van Oudhenden, including the crates required for their transportation;
• The intellectual content, including the list of documented objects as well as the exhibition texts and labels;
• The multimedia content.
Mask of foreigner
Architectural ornament (?)
Ceramic / 19th–20th Dynasty (1300–1100 BC)
The following costs are extra and payable by the host venue:

- The insurance of the objects for the period of the exhibition in the host premises;
- The customs and shipping fees for the transportation of the objects;
- The installation of the exhibition and production of the required decor and furniture;
- The technical equipment required for the presentation of the multimedia content.

For an additional fee, the host venue can also acquire the original plans for the exhibition space and construction specifications for the decor and furniture, as well as Musées de la civilisation expertise in reconfiguring the exhibition for the space available at the host venue.

Furthermore, to accompany the exhibition, a publication from the Egyptologist Maarten J. Raven, published by Beaux-arts éditions, is available.

Further Information

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Photographs of objects:
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